MONATLICHER INFORMATIONSBRIEF ÜBER EVANGELISATION

A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

Number 6
June 1957

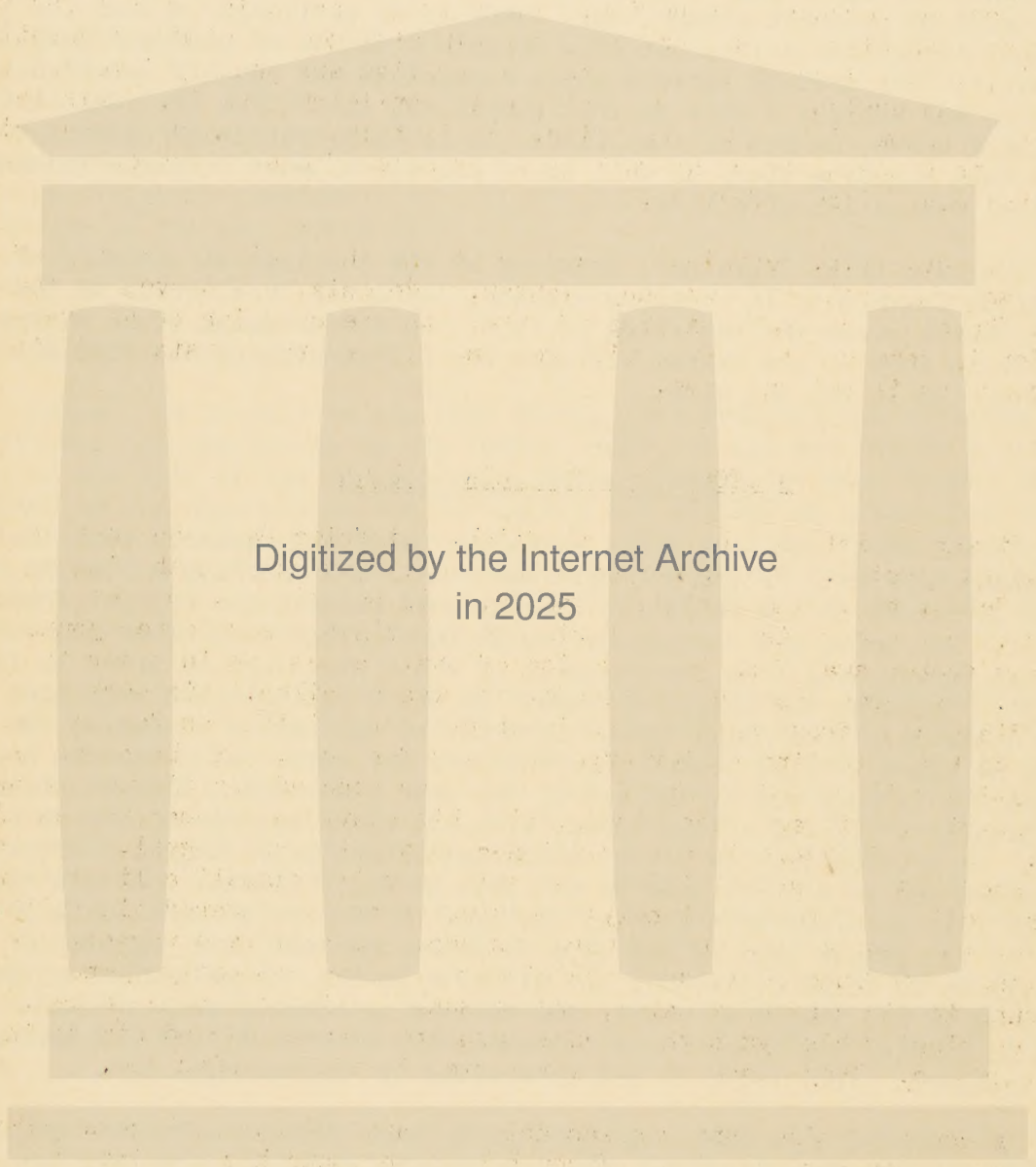
Again and again one is asked for some help that people can have in their work of personal evangelism. There is no particular method for this. Personal evangelism arises out of a certain attitude of mind and devotion of spirit. The monthly letters about evangelism are usually intended to describe and analyse a work so that people can learn from it. This letter, published below, is not of that kind. It is being published however since it is both a moving story as well as an example of what it takes to make personal evangelism effective.

The Rev. Dr.L. Schreiner, lecturer at the theological seminary of the Nommensen University in Pematang Siantar, Indonesia, has served in the Batak Church since the beginning of 1956. On the occasion of an evangelistic mission in some of the Pakpak villages one of the evangelists told him his own story as is set out here.

A STORY FROM THE BATAK CHURCH

It was Christmas Eve, 1931, at Salak. Winfried Banuarea went to the Christmas service. He was 25 years old and it was the eighth time he had spent Christmas in the Christian Church. His parents had not yet found Christ. But among his contemporaries in the village were other young people who had broken away from the paganism of their ancestors in order to follow Christ. Banuarea had learnt a trade; he was a tailor. His work took him long distances, from Salak in the interior of the island as far as the coast, where he hoped to find better opportunities for work. At Christmas he left his native village and at the end of the year reached the Singkel Kotakerangan district. It was a long tramp, with his heavy sewing-machine on his back. He settled down in a plantation-settlement near Singkel. The work increased and in a short time he was able to build himself a little house. But he felt more and more lonely; he knew no one who shared his faith. Most of the people whom he met were Moslems, the rest were pagans. In his loneliness he found fellowship and strength in the community hymns which he had sung in his church at Salak, and he sang to himself as he worked. He went on singing his hymns while customers and others watched him sewing shirts and trousers. They began to get interested in the melodies too.

In course of time Banuarea was able to make friends with some pagan boys and taught them his melodies. Through them he found his way into the houses of their parents. The first bridge-head had been won for the Gospel. That aroused the hostility of the Moslems. A plantation had bought some land from pagans living on the coast, and a dispute arose as to how the money should be spent; it was a considerable sum. Banuarea already knew some of the people who had sold the land; they were the fathers of the boys to



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

https://archive.org/details/ecumenical-letter-on-evangelism_1957-06_6

whom he had taught his Christian melodies. The men asked him,
"What do you think we should do with the money?"
"Build a school".
"Can you help us to build it?"
"Of course!"
"But we have no teacher".
"If you like, I will teach your children".

Banuarea began to collect the children together, to teach them, and to tell them about Jesus Christ. The melodies of the hymns led the way to the Christian message. But his advice to build a school for Christian instruction aroused the hostility of the Moslems.

Banuarea taught the people in the school (both children and adults) all about the Gospel, up to the story of Easter. He then explained to them what Sunday is, and introduced his own Sunday devotions into the school. People gradually began to come to the school on Sunday mornings to sing his hymns with him and to hear the Word of God. After a few months a little group of converts sprang up. School was held every day, and church on Sundays. The room was 15 x 6 metres, the walls were made of plaited reeds, the roof of corrugated iron. This was in 1932 in Singkel, a little timber-port in Southern Atjeh.

The following year Banuarea got an assistant for his school, and prepared the first applicants for baptism. A European plantation-owner openly expressed his Christian beliefs and supported Banuarea and his teacher. In 1935 the European leader of the mission-work visited the district for the first time. 75 people had been baptised. The next year a church bell rang in Singkel for the first time, calling people to worship the triune God. That was the signal for a counter-attack from Islam. The Moslems had simply looked on and bided their time, when the Christians opened a school. But when a local Christian church was formed with baptised converts, they took action. They regarded Banuarea as the root of all the evil. The village chieftain, who had a great respect for Banuarea, urged him to go away so as to avoid incurring still stronger hatred from the Moslems. Banuarea went off by canoe and on foot to the neighbouring Baros, but soon returned to Singkel. In the meantime the chieftain who had frequently supported him had fallen ill, and asked for baptism. But he died unbaptised. At this point of his report Banuarea excused himself: "At that time I did not know whether I ought to baptise him, I did not know that every Christian has the right to baptise in case of emergency."

Between 1937 and 1939 the congregation grew. Two or three times a year the missionary came from Salak, Banuarea's former home in the interior, where a mission station had been built. He baptised children and adults and celebrated Communion. Banuarea evangelised by preaching and distributing the Scriptures. In 1939 he was made a colporteur and extended his work. But before receiving this "official" appointment he had already been spreading the Gospel for eight years and had founded a church, with no other authority than that given by Christ to everyone who has been baptised, and without any training other than that given by the Lord to those who surrender themselves to Him.

One day in broad daylight his house was burnt down. Banuarea was in the garden planting palm-trees when the inexplicable flames broke out of his house. All his books were burnt. He got a fresh supply of tracts and Bibles. But a large part of his stock was confiscated in order to prevent him from distributing them. What did this loss matter, however, in face of the living Christian community which had grown up in Singkel?

Then the war broke out and in 1942 the enemy invaded Singkel. The Japanese troops and the Moslems united against the Christians, they agreed that the best thing was to eliminate them altogether. An officer rang the church bell as a ruse to make the Christians assemble. They were then locked up in their own church and threats were employed to force them to become Moslems. This persecution went on for a whole week, and force was used to make them deny Christ and follow Mahomet. But a group of loyal Christians stood by the teacher whom Banuarea had left in charge of the local congregation, and they got through this difficult time. Then a higher officer sent orders putting a stop to the persecution and allowed the Christians to practise their faith undisturbed.

Banuarea had returned to his native village; there he got married and returned a few days later with his wife to Singkel, which was then occupied. Between 1943 and 1946 many families left Singkel. The original congregation (founded in 1935) grew smaller, but ten new ones sprang up around it. In the largest there were 32 families, in the smallest 8 families. It was a good thing that Banuarea had appointed a leader in the original church very early on. He himself had to be constantly on the move, preaching the Christian message and distributing Scriptures. He no longer had any means of subsistence, but he managed to live! He travelled from place to place, from group to group. In one place he urged a few families to hold a service; in another he showed them how to teach the children. He appointed leaders - men who had worked with him in the years after 1935, he taught them to read the liturgy, to lead the singing and to give addresses. Nearly all the families lived by cultivating rice. Among the Christians in the district there was only one minor official.

In 1941 a new pastor had come to Salak, as successor to the European missionary who had been interned in 1940. He also walked for eight days through the primeval forest to Singkel to the remotest Christian group in his district. But in 1943 the Church was again left without a pastor and did not get another one until 1948. It was Banuarea who held the Christian groups together, visited them, taught the people, and appointed leaders and elders. He had become the shepherd of ten congregations with over 1,000 Christians in all. Regular services were held in all these congregations. They usually began by using a school-room as a church; but by 1954 all ten congregations had built churches with their own hands. They did so in accordance with the sound principle of cooperative enterprise: each family bought shares in the church-building.

In addition to seeing that everything was all right in the coastal area, Banuarea had to continue the work in Salak (his old home) during the years when there was no pastor. In this district ten other congregations were left with no one to look after them; he took care of them too.

In 1952 Banuarea the tailor was officially appointed a full-time evangelist. Since 1956 the Singkel district has had its own pastor, and so has the original church at Salak. Twenty Christian groups are visited and looked after. Banuarea is again free to live the Gospel behind his sewing-machine. His life shows clearly that evangelism is not an activity, nor a job; it means living the Gospel. Banuarea had had no "training" and no "appointment", but he could not keep silent; he had to tell others that he had a Saviour who loved him and who in his love seeks everyone in the world.